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POLITICAL CORRUPTION IN ENGLAND.

BY EDWARD PORRITT.

AFTER every General Election which has taken place in Great Britain since 1883, when the Corrupt Practices Act was passed, Englishmen have congratulated themselves that, at last, political corruption in Parliamentary constituencies was becoming of the past. They have noted the continuous falling off in the number of election petitions which have come before the judges of the High Court; and they have assumed, because there were fewer election-petition trials, and fewer instances in which boroughs were disfranchised for bribery and corruption, that the squalid and sordid conditions which had characterized Parliamentary electioneering from the days of Queen Elizabeth were almost, if not entirely, at an end.

There were only five election-petition trials after the General Election of 1906; and in commenting on these cases, as far as they had then come before the judges, the "Yorkshire Post," of Leeds, remarked in a tone of congratulation, that "the most interesting and most welcome fact about an election-petition trial nowadays is that it is tame." "If it had not been for the pleasantries of the judges and counsel," added the "Post," "Yarmouth and Maidstone would have been insufferably dull; and, unless Bodmin and the others that are still to be heard reveal something more astonishing than has come to light during the past few days, we shall conclude—as, indeed, we would wish to be able to do—that electoral corruption is virtually a thing of the past."

The election petition at Worcester, which was pending at the time this editorial appeared, did reveal "something more astonishing" than what had come to light at Yarmouth and Maidstone. The first revelations were so bad that the sitting Member

offered no defence after the petitioning candidate's case had been submitted to the court. He abandoned the seat; but the disclosures were so astounding that the Government, following precedents in such cases which date back to the disfranchisement of Grampound in 1821, appointed a Special Commission.

The Commission consisted of three barristers, who were deputed to hold a second inquiry with a view to determining whether Worcester should be disfranchised. The evidence taken by the Commissioners was more astounding than what had been offered at the trial of the election-petition. It showed a condition of electoral squalor every whit as bad as prevailed in many of the old Parliamentary boroughs in the last half of the eighteenth century. It disclosed conditions quite as bad as those which, in the last ninety years, have led to the temporary or permanent disfranchisement of a score or more of English and Irish boroughs—all boroughs which had sent representatives to the House of Commons before 1832, and in which the demoralizing traditions of Parliamentary electioneering had survived from the days between the reign of Queen Elizabeth and that of George III, and had continued to contaminate generation after generation of electors, and to make these places plague-spots in the British representative system.

Judged only by the number of election-petitions, there is ground for the congratulations which Englishmen nowadays bestow upon themselves after every general appeal to the constituencies; and such congratulations were especially in order after the General Election in January last. Then there were more contested elections—elections in which two or more candidates went to the polls—than at any General Election since the House of Commons came into existence six centuries ago. There were fewer walk-overs for candidates—Liberal or Conservative—than at any previous election of which detailed records are now available. Yet, notwithstanding this fact, and the further fact that 670 members had to be chosen from England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, only five election petitions went to the courts; and in only four cases was bribery alleged. These five petitions all originated in English constituencies; and, excepting that at Sheffield, where the petition was based on charges of a technical character, all the petitions were in old boroughs which have long had a more or less discreditable electoral history.

Yarmouth, Maidstone, Bodmin and Worcester, although not all proved to be equally squalid at the recent election-petition trials, although not all anything like so bad as Worcester, are just the constituencies in which a student of English electoral history would expect to find corruption surviving as long as it was possible for it to exist. Especially would this expectation be entertained of the old freeman and cathedral city of Worcester; for, under the old electoral system, and under that which existed from 1832 to the Corrupt Practices Act of 1883, the cathedral cities were, almost without exception, constituencies such as the Election Commission has recently shown Worcester still to be. They were places in which there was scarcely any hope for a Parliamentary candidate, no matter what his politics, until the electors were fully assured that he had brought plenty of money with him, and that he was willing to spend it freely in treating and buying votes.

"What is your experience of previous elections here?" asked Commissioner Avory, of one of the witnesses at Worcester, who had been a canvasser for the Liberal candidate at the election in January. "You cannot get nigh them," he answered, "unless your pockets are lined." "You may go two or three times for your man," he added, "and when you get him he wants to know whether you are going to put your hands down." "The parties are so equally divided," said another of these witnesses at Worcester—a lawyer, who was chairman of a Liberal ward committee, "that the bribable class practically rules the town. Whoever gets these two to three hundred votes will win." "Then," interposed the Commissioner, "the party that bribes will win." "Yes," was the answer of the chairman of a ward committee.

In the old days—that is before 1832—Worcester was a peculiar constituency. It was what was known as a city of a county. For local government purposes it was completely self-contained. It had its own sheriff, and was quite apart, as regards the administration of justice, local government, and militia, from the county in which it is situated, and to which it gives its name. There were then nineteen of these cities of counties or boroughs of counties. In some of these constituencies the freeholders had votes. In others they had not.

Worcester was one of the cities of counties in which the freeholders within the city had votes neither for the city Members of

Parliament nor for the Members for the county of Worcester. The electoral franchise was the exclusive right of the freemen—men who had obtained the freedom by inheritance, because their fathers were freemen; by serving an apprenticeship with tradesmen who were freemen; by redemption, or by having the freedom bestowed on them by the city corporation. Men who received the freedom from the corporation were known as honorary freemen. After 1747 the honorary freemen did not vote; but the conditions of the franchise were such that, when once a man had attained the freedom, whether by birth or servitude, it was immaterial to his right to exercise the Parliamentary vote whether he lived in Worcester or had any real connection with the city. The only qualification for voting was the negative one that the freeman had not been in receipt of poor-law relief; and, for fully a century before 1832, non-resident freemen who were settled in London, Bristol, Birmingham, Kidderminster and other places, were carried to Worcester at the expense of the Parliamentary candidates to vote at the elections.

Some other consideration besides travelling expenses had to be paid to the non-resident freeman to induce him to make the journey to Worcester; and it usually needed an equally substantial consideration to get the resident freemen to the polls. By the Act of 1832, non-resident freemen were deprived of the Parliamentary franchise. The vote was withheld from freemen made after the Act; and, as time went on, the remaining freemen, who were left in possession of the Parliamentary franchise, were lost among the ten-pound-householder voters created by the Act of 1832, and in the greatly enlarged electorate which came into existence in all boroughs after the Reform Act of 1867.

Worcester's traditions were bad when the first reform was made in 1832; and, as the recent inquiry by the Special Commission has disclosed, the enlargement of the electorate in 1832 and 1867 has not served to eradicate the electoral squalor which had already made itself evident in 1639, when the city corporation began to make honorary freemen in order to sway Parliamentary elections. It continued to make them to this end until 1747, when the House of Commons intervened, set aside the claims of the honorary freemen, and until 1832 left the Parliamentary destinies of the city in the hands of the resident and non-resident

freemen. From 1639, corrupt influences have been at work at Parliamentary elections there; and, with at least two hundred and sixty years of contaminating traditions behind them, it is scarcely surprising that even the drastic Corrupt Practices Act of 1883, which admittedly has done so much to reduce the number of election-petitions, has not yet purified the electorate in Worcester and other of the old Parliamentary boroughs in which the sordid traditions of pre-Reform days survive, and which have not been affected by the newer industrial conditions in England.

These traditions of beer-shop taps freely running for weeks at election-times and of vote-buying, especially the traditions of a right to a money equivalent for a vote, have been handed down from one generation of electors to the next, for nearly three centuries, in all the older Parliamentary constituencies; and they are naturally strongest and show the greatest power of survival in constituencies such as Yarmouth, Maidstone, Bodmin and Worcester, which are all towns that have been but little affected by the industrial developments of the nineteenth century—places in which few newcomers permanently settle; and from which emigration to the larger and newer world of industrialism is only small.

Generation follows generation in these old towns and cities; and what an election means in the way of free beer and money payments for votes, among the poorer and less self-respecting, is handed down from father to son, and from mother to daughter; and these traditions have not always been eradicated even by the drastic punishment of disfranchising a constituency for the lifetime of a Parliament or two. They are, in fact, so persistent and so tremendously difficult to uproot, they belong so much to the folk-lore of the community, that even Worcester must obviously be growing better if it is possible to accept the evidence of the ward committee chairman whose statements I have quoted, that in an electorate in which over 7,600 voters go to the poll the bribable voters in the election of 1906 did not number more than three hundred.

At first glance, the fact that there were only four petitions after the General Election of 1906 seems a splendid testimony to the efficacy of the Corrupt Practices Act, with which the name of Lord James of Hereford will always be honorably as-

sociated. Beyond question, it is a testimony to the good results of the Act of 1883. It must be remembered, however, that other causes besides the fear of heavy pecuniary and civic penalties under the enactment of 1883 have been at work uprooting the more squalid forms of electoral corruption.

Within two years after Parliament had passed the James Act, there came the Acts of 1884-5 extending the electoral franchise to all householders in the rural districts and redistributing Parliamentary seats. By these measures the electorate was enormously enlarged; and many small boroughs which had survived the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867, chiefly because they were controlled by territorial families which were then influential with the Government, were thrown into the newly created Parliamentary divisions. Not a few of these old boroughs had electoral histories no more wholesome than those of Yarmouth, Maidstone and Worcester. Their corruption and electoral squalor long antedated the Reform Act of 1832; and between their utterly unmerited survival in 1832, and their equally unregretted disappearance as distinct Parliamentary constituencies in 1885, these boroughs—pocket boroughs most of them—made endless work for the House of Commons Committees which dealt with election-petitions from 1770 to 1870, and after 1870 for the judges of the High Court who are now charged with the trial and determination of these petition cases.

Bribery was never characteristic of elections of knights of the shire in England—not as it was of county members from Scotland from 1707 onwards. Electors in English counties were always too numerous to admit of bribery with any certain effect; and the freeholders in counties were not of the class which could be influenced by beer and money bribes. They never lacked their share of free beer at election-times; but it was given for convivial rather than for political reasons. Loyalty to the great territorial families which controlled county elections, and pressure on tenants by landlords, undoubtedly often determined county elections from the time when seats in Parliament became in demand in the fifteenth century until as late as 1885, when the county electorate was greatly enlarged.

All this is beyond dispute; but students of the Journals of the House of Commons, and of the records of the Grenville Committees, have yet to find a solitary instance in which a knight of

the shire was unseated because he had bribed the freeholders. It thus came about that in 1885 the small boroughs of ill-repute in electoral annals which had survived the reforms of 1832 and 1867 were thrown into larger constituencies, in which bribery of the squalid sort—bribery like that at Worcester—was almost unknown. Consequently, bribery within these old small electoral areas came to an immediate end; and there was an abrupt end to the petitions which for generations previously had so often followed elections in these places when they were self-contained constituencies, electing one or two Members, as the case might be, to the House of Commons.

Another cause which accounts for the elimination of bribery, and for the steadily decreasing number of petitions which now follow a General Election, is the enormous increase in population in the manufacturing boroughs in the Midlands and the North of England. Boroughs in these parts of England which between 1832 and 1867 were small enough to be influenced by corrupt methods, and which during those thirty-five years usually furnished their quota of petition cases, nowadays have electorates as large as those of many counties between the first and the second Reform Acts; and bribery has disappeared in these constituencies for much the same reason as caused its disappearance after 1885 in the smaller old boroughs which were left as entities in the representative system after the Act of 1832. Where electorates are large, it is usually of little avail to bribe. Moreover, in the constituencies in industrial England trade-unionism, the cooperative movement, the building societies, and steadily increasing wages and the attendant higher scale of living have all done much to enhance the self-respect of the working-classes; and, together with cheap evening newspapers of the older and more staid school of journalism, they have helped to the political education of the working-classes, and taught them the civic value of the Parliamentary vote.

Whatever may be thought of the tendency of the Labor movement, whatever speculations may be made as to its ultimate result, it is beyond question that the increasing number of Labor Members who have been of the House of Commons, since Macdonald and Burt were elected in 1868, has had an enormous influence in purifying the electorate in the older industrial boroughs. The legislation of the last thirty-five years in the

interest of the factory workers, the miners, and the artisans, has taught the more self-respecting of the working-classes that the Parliamentary vote has a greater value to them than any money bribe; and this growing realization of the value of a vote, apart from the uncertainty and risk which must attend bribery, has had much to do with the almost complete disappearance of election-petitions in the industrial borough constituencies.

Between the Union and 1885, Irish boroughs contributed quite their full quota of election-petition trials. Many miserable, small Irish boroughs survived the Parliamentary Reform Act of 1832 for the same reason as they survived the Union in 1800. They were controlled, if they were not owned outright, by Irish territorial families, who jobbed them for ecclesiastical and civil patronage, for peerages or promotion in the peerage; and these boroughs were permitted to survive in 1800 and again in 1832 only out of respect to the susceptibilities of the landlords or moneyed men who controlled them. Like English boroughs of the same class, most of these Irish boroughs disappeared in 1885; and, in the last twenty years, there have been fewer election-petition cases from Ireland than in any similar period since 1661, when the first election-petition was adjudicated upon by the House of Commons of the Irish Parliament.

The merging of the rotten boroughs in the county divisions has done much to diminish the number of election-petitions. Quite as obviously conducive to this end has been the change which has come over Ireland since Parnell put new life and vigor into the Nationalist movement. I am not an advocate of Home Rule; but no Unionist who is familiar with the electoral history of Ireland between the Union and the Reform Act of 1885, and who is acquainted with electoral conditions there since 1885, can disguise from himself the fact that the Nationalist movement has worked two beneficial changes in Irish politics, and in particular in the economy of the representative system of Ireland. It has weeded out almost completely—certainly in every province except Ulster—the old place-hunter Irish Members, who, from the Union until about 1880, made miserable the lives of successive Patronage Secretaries to the Treasury by their never-ending intrigues and pesterings for ecclesiastical, civil, military, naval and colonial patronage for themselves, their kinsfolk or their political heelers in the constituencies.

Irish Members learned this kind of business in the old Irish Parliament. It was most rampant after the deposition of the "undertakers" about 1770; after the time when the Lord-Lieutenants and their Secretaries undertook the management—the "bossing," as it would be called in the phraseology of American politics—of the Irish House of Commons. It continued almost as rampant until the seventies of last century. Its traditions were as persistent as those of bribery in English boroughs like Worcester; and nothing but a popular movement like that behind the Irish demand for Home Rule could ever have cleared the House of Commons and the precincts of the chambers of the Government whips at Westminster of these Irish place-hunter Members. It is this same popular movement that has ended bribery in so many Irish constituencies. Men who are of the people and little better off in purse than the majority of their constituents; men whose election expenses and whose maintenance - charges while they are of the House of Commons must come out of funds popularly subscribed, cannot bribe. Their constituents are aware of their circumstances; and they regard these Members of the new class of Parliamentary representatives in a totally different light from the old-school Irish Member, who was ready to bribe as far as his means would allow, and equally ready to make the most of his vote in obtaining Government patronage when once he had made his way to Westminster.

Why petitions from Scotland are so infrequent, and why they have always been infrequent, is easily explained. In Scotland squalid bribery never got a foothold. Scotland, from the Union in 1707 until its old electoral system was radically reformed in 1832, was "managed" more completely and more thoroughly than any other part of the British Islands that ever sent Members to the House of Commons. In the persons of the Duke of Queensberry, the Earl of Islay (afterwards Duke of Argyll), James Stuart Mackenzie, and Lord Melville, better known as Henry Dundas—but especially in the persons of Islay and Dundas—Scotland had a succession of political managers who could have learned nothing from any modern American boss. But not more than three thousand voters—county and borough—ever took part in electing Scotland's forty-five members; and, while most of these electors had their price, and knew how to stand out for it, there was usually patronage sufficient to go round—suf-

ficient offices in church, law, civil service, the army and the navy, as well as in India and the colonies, to tie all the electors to the political fortunes of the "boss" who happened to be in control. In this way it came about that, from the Union to 1832, there were few petitions from Scotland in which bribery was alleged; and there have been fewer still since the Parliamentary franchise was extended in 1832, 1867 and 1884-5.

The Corrupt Practices Act and the other influences at work since 1883 have certainly almost put an end to squalid bribery; but careful and detailed investigations which have been made since the General Election in January* have served to emphasize a fact that has long been obvious to students of political organization and electoral methods in England. This is that, since the eradication of direct bribery began—and this reform has been going on for more than sixty years—there has been a return to the old method of bribing constituencies in the bulk.

This was the earliest form of bribery, and can be traced as far back as 1535, when men eager to be of the House of Commons offered to serve without pay, and thus save the constituencies the cost of their journeys to Westminster and their wages. Later on, candidates offered to build town halls and bridges, pave streets and install water-works in boroughs that would send them to Parliament; and it is this collective bribery in a new form that has been reintroduced since the elimination of the individual bribe. Candidates are now expected to contribute to the local churches, flower shows, cricket clubs, school sports and friendly society galas; and, in a large proportion of the constituencies in England, these subscriptions amount to a charge of from £500 to £1,500 a year. It will thus be realized that, although squalid bribery has at last almost reached a vanishing-point, bribery has by no means disappeared. Some few members—for instance, Mr. John Morley—have withstood the pressure for this kind of largesse; but, except for these few and for the Labor Members, who, of course, are not in a position to bribe, there is as yet no movement for the elimination of this newer form of corruption.

EDWARD PORRITT.

* "Electioneering Up to Date." By Charles Roden Buxton. London, 1906.